

## **Explaining the role of soft power in enhancing Iran's political image in Afghanistan Case Study: Iran-Afghanistan Scientific Cooperation**

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### **Extended abstract**

#### **1. Introduction**

Afghanistan is one of the neighbors that Iran can exert a great deal of influence through the use of culture and higher education. Afghanistan is Iran's cultural backyard. The linguistic, cultural and historical commonalities are so intertwined that no one can fill Iran's cultural vacancy in Afghanistan. Most of Afghanistan's textbooks are in Persian. Many scientific resources used by Afghan students have been published in Iran. There is a curious desire among Afghan students to attend higher education institutions and Iranian universities. Afghan families' tendency to use Iranian radio and television products, despite the emergence of dozens of colorful radio and television broadcasters, mainly broadcasting Western or Indian films, etc. all show the importance of the cultural sphere in the relations between the two countries. Unfortunately, despite this tendency, there are many shortcomings in the field of Iranian cultural activity in Afghanistan. If Iran wants to have security, political, economic and other influence in Afghanistan, then it must pay more attention to culture and education, because Iran's relative advantage is to have a more effective presence in Afghanistan than other competitors.

#### **2. Review of Literature**

Education is recognized as a source of soft power that enhances productivity and the quality of the university; separates international students; and most importantly establishes relationships and collaborates between internal and external researchers. Therefore, it can be used as a tool for creating national goodwill. Soft power in higher education consists of three dimensions of values, resources and tools. Thus, soft power through higher education can be used to link the values of the host country with international students to achieve the goals appropriate to a country's policies.

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Interestingly, the process of internationalization in higher education can be regarded as one of the most important and key tools in soft power. This process has helped to understand the dimensions and application of soft power internationally. It looks at higher education from the four perspectives of activity, competence, ethics and process. The prospects for these activities have a cultural dimension, including the presence of international students and academics exchanges between universities. Holmes and Rumbley (2015) argue that soft power, along with public diplomacy and national security, is politically motivated, while higher education enhances the capacities available in this type of power. Improvement in the quality of higher education, the accreditation and categorization of national higher education institutions and the progress in human resource development can be motivated by social and cultural incentives to resolve global disputes, as well as to create global citizenship in order to create understanding.

### **3. Method**

The present study is a descriptive-analytical one. The information required in this study is gathered (libraries and retrieval) using sources and articles on the Internet and scientific reports.

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

The starting point for the two countries' engagement in 2001 is the establishment of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Partnership. Subsequently, the Afghanistan Educational and Scientific Reconstruction Staff was also formed at the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology in 2002, which was directly affected the visit of Afghan Minister of Higher Education Faegh Sharif of Tehran and the signing the Academic-Educational Memorandum. Also, in 2003 President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Kabul as the first foreign leader expressed Iran's satisfaction and acceptance with the transitional government, which strengthened relations between the two countries. Following this trip, the first Joint Cooperation Commission of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was formed in 2004 and its second meeting was held in 2006. In particular, a bilateral cooperation agreement was signed between Herat Province and Khorasan Razavi Province in 2005. In 2007, due to the growing insecurity in southern Afghanistan, a security agreement was signed between Iran and Afghanistan and in 2008 a joint statement was issued at the level of the vice presidents between Afghanistan and Iran. Also in 2010, after the new Afghan presidential election, a trilateral Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan meeting was held in Islamabad and the third meeting of the Iran-Afghanistan Joint Cooperation Commission. The first meeting of the Commission on Defense Cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan was held in 2011 and the trilateral meeting of Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan was held in Trahan. The fourth joint Iran-Afghanistan Cooperation Summit was recently held in 2012, during the Governor of Balkh traveled to Khorasan Razavi. In view of the above, it can be conclude that the establishment of scientific-educational partnerships

between the universities of Iran and Afghanistan within the framework of political relations between the two countries is subject to the mutual agreement of the parties to establish interactions and general relations between the two countries. This agreement is completely dependent on the political situation of the countries and the region. Prior to 2001, due to the severe political conflicts in Afghanistan, no interaction between the two countries was possible. Therefore, from a top-down and linear perspective, the political factor can be considered as an effective factor in determining the relationship between the two countries, especially between academia.

### 5. Conclusion

Based on the mutual agreements of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad with Afghan universities, the level of cooperation has exceeded the level of teacher-student exchange and has been enhanced to a high level of transboundary higher education, namely the establishment of a postgraduate course and the establishment of a university. However, the political and diplomatic relations of the two countries have been affected many of the provisions of the treaties and the parties' unwillingness to cooperate; these have led to the conclusion of contracts and the interruption or suspension of relations has led to the suspension of inter-university cooperation and the unwillingness of the parties. Despite the high capacities and potentials available for greater and better utilization, and on the other hand, the high demands of the Afghan citizens to exploit, these have not been properly utilized.

**Keywords:** Educational Cooperation, University, Soft Power, Iran and Afghanistan.

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